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ABSTRACT

An in-depth study of five successful rural Nebraska communities with populations ranging from 450 to 6,000 was undertaken to determine why some rural communities are coping with fundamental restructuring while others seem to have surrendered to the current agricultural economic crisis. Background information was gathered on each community, and community leaders were asked a series of questions related to quality of life, the economy, leadership, and future planning. The information gathered was analyzed for characteristics in common across all communities and used to write community profiles. A synthesis of insights into community success led to development of a series of 20 possible clues to rural community survival. The clues include points such as evidence of community pride, emphasis on quality in business and community life, careful use of fiscal resources, sophisticated use of information resources, willingness to seek help from the outside, and strong belief in and support for education. This report includes case studies of the five successful Nebraska communities (Broken Bow, Chadron, Eustis, Geneva, and Wausa) and an annotated list of the 20 clues to rural community survival. (JHZ)

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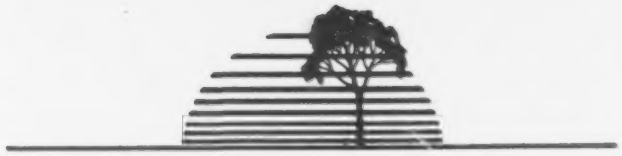

Heartland Center for Leadership Development

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The Entrepreneurial Community Case Study Project Identifying

"20 Clues to Rural Community Survival"

A Research Project of the

Heartland Center for Leadership Development

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Background Information on the
Entrepreneurial Community Case Study Project
Identifying
20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

Why are some rural communities coping with fundamental restructuring when others seem to have surrendered to crisis?

With that question in mind, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development undertook an in-depth study of five rural Nebraska communities with populations ranging from 450 to 6000. The communities were selected from among 20 small towns that were identified as surviving the economic trends stemming from the worst agricultural economic crisis since the Great Depression.

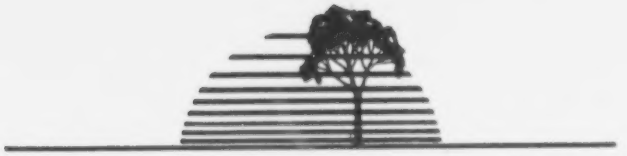
The communities were selected by the Nebraska Governor's Policy Research Office, which sponsored the study. They were selected based on a review of census data and labor statistics, geographic representation and population size, and nominations from people knowledgeable about the state.

The case studies were developed to:

* provide an alternative, positive perspective on rural communities that might contrast with the "dying community" image that has become commonly accepted.
* provide information to state legislative and executive branch leaders for potential use in guiding programs of state government.
* provide an information base for leadership development activities aimed at leaders in rural communities.

Method of Study. After gathering background information on each community from available state, federal and private information resource banks, community leaders were identified and contacted. In each community, both positional leaders and reputational leaders were interviewed (in person or by phone) and each was asked a series of questions under four topics: Quality of Life, the Economy, Leadership, and Future Planning. Information gathered in those interviews was combined with impressions gained from community visits and other informational materials, analyzed for characteristics in common across all communities, and used as background to write community profiles.

Conclusions. A synthesis of insights into community success led to development of a series of possible "clues to rural community survival," and these clues were analyzed and re-analyzed following each community study. Finally, the clues were formalized into the list of 20 Clues to Rural Community Survival included in these materials.



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20 CLUES TO RURAL COMMUNITY SURVIVAL*

1. Evidence of community pride.
2. Emphasis on quality in business and community life.

3. Willingness to invest in the future.
4. Participatory approach to community decision-making.

5. Cooperative community spirit.
6. Realistic appraisal of future opportunities.

7. Awareness of competitive positioning.
8. Knowledge of the physical environment.

9. Active economic development program.
10. Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders.

11. Acceptance of women in leadership roles.
12. Strong belief in and support for education.

13. Problem-solving approach to providing health care.
14. Strong multi-generational family orientation.

15. Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life.
16. Attention to sound and well-maintained infrastructure.

17. Careful use of fiscal resources.
18. Sophisticated use of information resources.

19. Willingness to seek help from the outside.
20. Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.

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* Findings from the Entrepreneurial Community Case Study Project conducted by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development with support from the Policy Research Office, State of Nebraska. September - December 1986.

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"People don't survive in the Sandhills if they aren't self-reliant. That goes for communities as well."

-- comment from a Broken Bow resident

The town square in Broken Bow, complete with trees, park and bandstand, is a Nebraska treasure. It offers the visitor a strong sense of the past and an immediate feeling for the community. Lined with small businesses, the square presents a picture of people shopping, walking to cafes and lunch spots and stopping to talk. A little below the surface is another image: empty stores and businesses that look as if no business had been carried on for quite a while. "Of course we've lost some businesses...losing the J.C.Penny store was a terrific problem, but that space is occupied now... the parents who bring their kids there for a dance class stop to shop and that's what we want," explained one community leader. Broken Bow is a community that works hard to turn problems into opportunities.

With a population slightly less than 4,000, Broken Bow enjoys a location that puts it "on the way" for many travelers. Those travelers, driving both east and west, do have a considerable impact on the community. Perhaps more important is the impact of the Becton-Dickinson VACUTAINER systems plant. As one business owner explained, "Because of that plant, we have a revolving group of talented, interesting people who live in our town. They bring new ideas and new energy -- a great resource for us."

People seem to be one of the community's greatest resources. While Broken Bow residents will mention the excellent schools, the variety of health care facilities and social services that may make the town into a major retirement communty, residents always turn back to the people of Broken Bow as the factor that will keep the community strong in the future. " We're committed to straightening out this economic mess," said one business owner. "People here know they can make a difference."

Economic development activities have given Broken Bow a fairly high profile in the state. Newcomers to the community mention a new feeling of action apparent in the last six months, linked to a newly established group of energetic young residents who call themselves "The Nest Builders". They managed to raise $40,000 for economic development efforts in just a few weeks and, while realizing that Broken Bow has felt the impacts of the changes in the farm economy, are determined to discover ways to renew the local economy. "We have lots of folks who are really resistent to change but the action types will pull them along. We have to find ways to help local entrepreneurs make a go of their ideas," commented one Nest Builder.

Broken Bow has enjoyed the support of local residents who chose to share the results of their successes with the community. The Melham family, for example, has made several sizable contributions to the town that required matching funds from residents. One result is a remarkable health care facility. There are many other examples of this type of loyalty on the part of Broken Bow natives. "Every town will talk about problems of consumer loyalty, but Broken Bow has been incredibly lucky to have the loyalty of firms like Brown and Denisia and the Melham contributions," said a community leader. "There's no doubt their help has made this a better place to live."

In addition to the notion that if you are successful, you should contribute some of that success back into the community, the leadership in Broken Bow offers evidence of providing a solid basis for community survival. Many residents commented that no small group controlled the town but, as one community member explained, "Certainly there are leaders that you would ask for help but,these days, that means a fairly large group of individuals who are willing to work together, not just a small group of controllers." Another said, "This is a very open town. If a newcomer arrives and wants to work for the community, it's really easy to take on a leadership role."

Getting and using help from outside resources seems to be an approach that community leadership has maximized. Networking and resource linking to state agencies and programs are definitely part of the economic development approach at work in the community. " You may have to be persistent and, at the same time, careful to get what you need, but technical assistance and outside funding can decide the success or failure of a new small business.... After all, if you don't know where to get help, you probably won't get any!" observed a Nest Builder.

One community leader also observed that Broken Bow was in a unique position to survive these hard economic times. "Unlike many other towns in Nebraska, we've never been able to rely on the Interstate to bring us business. Our community has always had to compete because of our location. Economic survival has never been handed to us as a result of traffic! We <u>have</u> to be innovative here," she said.

Like other communities,Broken Bow seems to be in the forefront of efforts to work on economic development from a countywide perspective. Perhaps because the community is located nearly in the middle of Custer County, Broken Bow has maintained a position of leadership in the effort to get communities working together.

One impact of economic turmoil is an increase in church memberships and related activities. "A crisis makes people care," observed one church member. Broken Bow has a wide representation of churches, many built during the Depression. One new church has been built in the last year.

Perhaps the strain felt in the community of Broken Bow as a result of the crisis in the agricultural economy has had some positive results for the town. Only two years ago a "Rally for Rural America, a public event in support of farmers, attracted few townspeople. Today the community is well aware of the problem. Community leaders know how much the farm crisis has deeply affected the town.

The increased awareness of shared economic dependence and the need for working together are very apparent in Broken Bow. The vision of the community as a retirement center -- for the region, not just the immediate community -- seems to be a vision that is shared by community members and leaders. "We've identified some of our strengths. We have the right atmosphere and lifestyle here, the medical facilities and services... and I think we have something to offer in the way of a great place to retire," observed a community leader.

"It all goes back to that Sandhill brand of self-reliance. It's never been easy to make a go of it out here, but," asked a resident, "why would a person want to live anywhere else?"

"People come here for something that is not someplace else."

-- Comment from a community leader in Chadron

Driving into Chadron from the south, it's no wonder the people here think tourism will play an even stronger role in their community's development in the future. For the last few miles, you drive through Nebraska's pine ridge, as plateau becomes rolling hills and, finally, pine-dotted buttes, until the highway drops gracefully into a broad and lush valley. There, the town sits, literally surrounded by the state's natural beauty.

Not far away, following the White River to the west, is Fort Robinson, one of the nation's most famous "Indian Outposts." This is where Red Cloud brought his people after the great treaties were signed; where Crazy Horse, the mystic Sioux warrior, died; where a young Army doctor named Walter Reed treated "Old Jules" Sandoz.

Farther north, there is Toadstool Park, Nebraska's own barren, windswept bad lands. Keep going, and you will reach the Black Hills of South Dakota, with their mammoth rock portraits of American presidents and multitudes of nature's own phenomena.

"Chadron: Gateway to the Black Hills," reads some of the local promotion.

Location is important here. A town of 6,000, a community of perhaps 9,500, counting the State Park community, the Job Corps, the Forest Service centers and the ranches in between, it is 100 miles either north or south before a larger community will appear on the horizon. Driving east (across northern Nebraska) or west (into Wyoming), the traveler would go even further before finding a town of comparable size.

In addition to the tourist industry, said one community leader "we're destined to become a trade center" because of location. The town's location and geographic isolation have already defined the community as a "center of" kind of place:

* Medical facilities here, already extensive, are expanding.
* Human and social services are congregated here, in agencies that specialize in family planning, nutrition for the elderly, alcohol and drug treatment and other services.
* The railroad, busy with coal trains from nearby Wyoming, just expanded its facilities here.
* The Pine Ridge Reservation is just 20 miles north and west, and Chadron is the biggest town that close to the native American population there.

But location has its down side, as well. Prices for retail and consumer goods are higher, one of the few complaints volunteered by local citizens. And the community sometimes feels like a "foster child" to the rest of the state. It is, after

all, more than 400 miles to the state's capitol, and nearly 500 to Omaha. (One Chadron resident, asked recently for suggestions on where to hold the next convention for a membership association that had outgrown an Omaha facility, suggested a city in Canada, on the grounds that "it would be closer").

"Quality of life" is on everyone's mind here, and everyone knows what's good about it. Clear air and clean water rank high on the list, as does the attractive countryside. But so do human traits, such as a small-town atmosphere, a strong sense of community, a family orientation. The word "neighborly" fits nicely. "People here want to know everything about you," joked one resident of six years, "down to the kind of toilet paper you use."

Quality of life is also mentioned often in talk about economic development and the future, when the focus becomes what the town won't do to attract new business. No one here suggests chasing smokestacks as essential to economic development. "We don't want large industry," said one leader in the business community. His idea of the right kind of manufacturing was the RV business that recently moved to town, employing three full-time and six part-time workers. Or maybe a retirement community, populated by quiet residents with constant incomes and a preference for "high-quality but not fancy" products and services.

Recently, Chadron has in fact been something of a boom town, which the town's leaders concede was not altogether planned or even expected. A freak hail storm last summer raised havoc with virtually every building in town. As a result, some $24 million in improvements were made to homes and businesses, all of it financed by insurance settlements. Construction workers have kept the motels full and helped push consumer spending along.

At the same time, a $5 million addition to the state college campus was being finished, the railroad was expanding its divisional headquarters, and a large church was building a new facility. "Many of these things had been under consideration for 10 years or more," said one community leader. "It's as much timing as push."

Others, however, pointed to the million-dollar downtown improvement project, funded partly with government grants, and said without a lot of push that project would never have taken shape. Or the new supermarket, built by grocers from Broken Bow; the appliance store, expanding from Valentine; the motel, built by a Colorado motel owner. Votes of confidence in the community's future, they say, as recognized by outsiders.

This is a community that has not been hurt that much by the sour agricultural economy devastating some parts of the state. Partly, perhaps mostly, because the main agricultural activity here is cattle-raising, not growing crops. Partly because the ranchers here didn't over-extend themselves on new equipment or high-priced land. "I told the fellas down at the coffee shop that our people didn't fly as high as they did in the irrigation

community," said one financial leader. "This country is a lot rougher. They can't see what their neighbors are doing, so they just plug away and keep going," he said, only half joking.

That advantage gives the community's leadership an opportunity to think more about the future than to worry about immediate survival, although several community leaders said too much of the community's planning is reactive. One group that doesn't wait for others is called "The Wild Ideas Bunch," a self-proclaimed role. The wild ideas emanate from a dozen community and business leaders who meet regularly -- formally or informally -- to generate new ideas and then identify who ought to act on them. The downtown improvement project is one result: The group generated an idea for a huge, enclosed mall. When that idea hit the news, "it got a lot of people working on a more sober plan," said one member of the "Bunch."

Much of the community's planning for the future is actually done by others, pretty much outside of the control of community leadership. The college is a major influence on the community, and its impact is both recognized and respected. But its critical planning decisions are made elsewhere. The same is true for the railroad, the Forest Service, the State Park, and the Job Corps. When needed, however, virtually the whole community turns out to help. That was the case when the town celebrated its centennial about a year ago. The celebration required two years of planning and $200,000 in local contributions to make it go.

One resident identified four key leadership groups in the community, ranging from people in official positions to quiet, unassuming leaders whose opinions are highly respected. Another said the community enjoys "situational leadership," meaning that "the same person doesn't take charge each time." Service clubs are usually active in any significant planning.

When people talk about their vision for the community's future, what you hear is what residents of many smaller communities say: we'd like to keep it about the same, maybe a little larger, more economic diversity. Chadron's newspaper has been running, every two weeks, a full page of reminders of good things about the community to "accentuate the positive rather than threaten with the negative." Altogether, 24 different aspects of the community have been included and, as one result, several inquiries about possible business ventures have been received. But such things also serve to remind local residents of what they have right here at home.

One person who knows Chadron well describes it as a community that "knows its assets" and knows how to "emphasize its uniqueness." Its people are conservative and independent, products of a frontier heritage, no doubt. But they also know the value of cooperation, when that's what they need to do. "When there is a need," said one community leader, "we all work together and get it done."

"If you're going to do something, you might as well do it right."

-- Comment from a community leader in Eustis

The first thing you see when you drive into Eustis, Nebraska, population 460, is the school. A complex of several buildings, it houses a 1400-seat gymnasium and an Olympic-size indoor pool. Outside, a recently refurbished running track encircles the football field. A modern instruction wing houses an up-to-date library, classrooms and sound-insulated music room. Nearby sits an even newer industrial arts facility. All for 160 students, grades kindergarten through 12.

Driving through Eustis, which hugs a hill between Highway 23 and the creek south of town, you begin to see what "doing it right" means. Streets paved, lawns neatly trimmed, houses painted just right. Parks tucked here and there, with playground equipment or tennis courts.

Downtown, across from the co-op elevator, a modern bank, just one year old, dominates the entry to the mainstreet. Further up the street -- toward the water tower -- sits the new senior center, where more than half of the town's over-60 crowd stops each day for lunch. A modern American Legion hall nearby is just one of the facilities available for community events. There's still the school gymnasium and, oh yes, the new county fair building south of town. "Just follow the new road to the bridge and turn left." You find it across the street from the baseball field, the one with the new lights for turning night into day on warm summer evenings.

This is Eustis, a farm community, in a farm state, where farming is in trouble.

Times <u>are</u> tough here. When you ask, you hear phrases like "pulling in our belts." But you don't hear much, really. And, anyway, these are people for whom "frugal" is an inbred characteristic, good times or bad. "People don't talk about the economy except in general terms," observed one "recent" arrival, nine years a community resident. "When farmers have money they spend it, when they don't, they don't," said another resident.

Still, the quality of life hasn't changed drastically since the economy went sour, partly, say townspeople, because of the values associated with a strong German heritage. That heritage is visible everywhere -- on the Wurst Haus and the Shootin' Haus, for example. It shows up at the annual Wurst Tag festival (Sausage Day is how it translates) when as many as 1000 people may turn out up for the all-day celebration.

"When it's time to work, they bust their tails together. When it's time to play, they let their hair down," observed a transplanted Irishman. In fact, less than half of the residents of the community (defined here -- by everyone -- as the town plus

the surrounding countryside) are of German heritage. But then new residents, said one relative newcomer, are considered "cousins" shortly after their arrival. The heritage is a rallying point.

There's a strong sense of community in Eustis, a family orientation, good relations between young and old. One church did a study several years ago to find out how volunteers might help the elderly who lived alone. "We found out that an amazing network already existed -- without any organization -- to pick up the mail, do the shopping, get them to the beauty parlor and back," said a church leader.

That sense of community spills over into the town's personality in many ways, such as how decisions are made. Ideas get bandied about for a long time -- in the service clubs, the social gatherings, the school events, on the street corners. Someone or some group gets the ball rolling, others put in their two cents worth, some money gets donated. An idea becomes a reality.

The "real meetings take place outside the structured meetings," one resident observed. "These things overlap. They are all together all the time...things get discussed...a consensus is reached."

The new track at the high school is an example. A group of community residents more or less decided that the dirt track wasn't good enough, so they searched around till they found a pile of cinders at a coal-burning power plant 80 miles away. They talked the plant into giving them what they could carry away, and 90 Eustis area farmers each made one trip, hauling a truckload back to the school. The same group raised the money for a curb around the track and the project was complete. No tax money, no public hearings, lots of community participation.

It takes a heavy dose of participation, not just one or two people doing all the pushing. "One person doesn't make or break a community," one resident noted.

Leadership is, in fact, diffused, although the Chamber of Commerce or the Village Board is usually involved in major projects. "The Chamber does the planning and the Board does the approving," was one description of how roles are played out. Some projects, such as the new sewage treatment plan, were in planning for 10 or 20 years before they became a reality. A new water system is the next big project, and one community leader said projects of that magnitude always will require funding help from the state or federal government, because the little towns just can't afford them by themselves.

Smaller projects usually get done with a majority of community funds. A new ambulance was purchased entirely with donated money, and now 24 residents are certified EMTs. The Senior Center, a strong point of community pride, was built with

local funds matching grant funds 2 to 1. Pledges, which were gathered in 60 days, were made for three years, but the mortgage was burned in two.

Even though it is common for youngsters to graduate from the high school, go to college and build a life elsewhere, some stay in town or return later and, in fact, there's a healthy contingent of young people. One of the churches, for example, displayed a demographic chart showing that the largest number of parishioners fell between the ages of 20 and 35. Most of the town's business owners are under 40, and several of them are in their twenties.

Even with a younger generation of leaders, some people worry that planning for the future is taking a backseat to worry about the present. "It's hard to look 20 years ahead when you don't know what next year will bring," one business leader observed. "When you get scared, you don't do a whole lot of deep thinkin'."

Some people are worried that too many businesses are starting up without adequate capital. At the same time, however, farmers are spending more time with agronomists and CPAs, and they are becoming better marketers of their over-abundant crops. At the school, more and more children are on free or reduced-price lunches and cash flow is a problem for some families. But a nonprofit corporation was set up to build low-income housing units so that people who might otherwise have moved would have a reason to stay.

As in other small towns in the rural areas, economic diversity usually means that the farmers are planting three crops instead of two, or that they are raising some animals as well as feed grains. They'd like to attract a small industry to the town, though. A decent clothing store would be nice. There aren't any vacant business buildings, however, and even that is taken as a drawback to economic development because anyone moving in would have to build first.

Townspeople are motivated, in part, by what they see going on in some neighboring villages, where, they say, people have given up. They don't want that to happen here.

"Farmers are hurting," said one community leader. "When they hurt, we all hurt." Yet people are going to stick out the hard times and optimism is a built-in value, in quantity. "It's more or less their make-up," one resident observed.

"No one has given up," said a business leader. "If we don't try it, we'll never better ourselves."

"It takes more than money and location to keep a community alive."

"Stuff does get done."

-- Comments from community leaders in Geneva

To grocery shoppers in many parts of Nebraska, the town of Geneva is the home of "Auto-Gro" tomatoes. Bright red and juicy, they appear on produce shelves year-round. They cost more, but they taste like real tomatoes, not those plastic-like things that are shipped in from Mexico during the winter months, when America's produce growers take a back seat to those south of the border.

A greenhouse product, Geneva tomatoes are one of the few examples of alternate farm produce in a state where traditional farming is hurting and, to no one's surprise, the farm communities are hurting as well.

A town of 2400 people, barely 20 miles off Interstate 80, Geneva is in the heart of Nebraska's deep-well irrigation country, and the farmers of Fillmore County were among the nation's first to embrace modern irrigation practices. A progressive bunch now, as then, the county's farmers are busy learning how to use computers to improve their management practices and how to exploit the commodity markets, rather than let the markets control them.

The county's farmers have also tightened down, since the farm economy turned bad, and statistics made available by the University of Nebraska in Lincoln indicate that Geneva's retail sales in 1985 were only 72% of 1983's figures. Recent such statistics, which are studied intently by the community's leaders, indicate that things may be improving now, at least a little bit.

This is a town that has suffered a bank closing, like many other communities where farm loans constitute a significant part of any bank's portfolio. It's a town where two major industries -- one producing mobile homes, the other irrigation systems -- started and then failed in recent memory. Several stores on the town square have closed, including the computer store, a beauty shop and a men's clothing store. Eighty-six homes are for sale. The town competes with its neighbor, York, to the north, where the population is three times as large and where Interstate traffic buzzes by in a steady stream, 24 hours a day, spawning discount shopping centers and fast-food corners.

"There's lots of confusion" about the economy, conceded one long-time resident, now a business leader. "There are those interested in seeing more jobs, more development. There's also lots of negativism, lots of despair among the businesses on Main Street."

But there is also, as one community leader put it, "lots of resiliency."

A close-knit community, one resident described the town's size as just right: "Small enough to know everyone, large enough for the basic services."

Here, though, the basic services are fairly comprehensive. For its size the town has more than its share of doctors, dentists, and lawyers. The Community Arts Council is unique, sponsoring a half dozen or more touring theatrical performances each year. A community education and recreation program is paid for by the school, the community, and the hometown bank, each picking up one-third of the costs. Three auto dealers are still in business, representing the major American car makers, and three -- yes, three -- farm implement dealers.

The word "excellent" always precedes "public schools," when townspeople tick off community strengths, which also include lots of churches and a country club.

Then there's the hospital, with its new million-dollar long-term care wing, a mobile medical van that travels throughout the county, lifeline telephone services for shut-ins and the house-cleaning service, also available county-wide. Aggressive and innovative (and operating in the black), the hospital found itself a while back with a large house-keeping staff and a steep decline in patient days. Looking at the situation as an opportunity, the institution decided to try selling house-cleaning services. Now six vans run hospital staff members all over the countryside, cleaning people's homes.

How would you describe the hospital? "Innovative in the face of acute-care decline," said one business leader. A prescription, perhaps, that might be rewritten for rural communities.

Geneva is one community where the public or service sector economy is strong, and that adds stability to payroll, a fact which does not escape business leaders. In addition to the school and the hospital, Geneva is the county seat. It is also home for the Youth Development Center, a state correctional facility. Fighting off two attempts by the state to close the center has reminded people that community pride, team spirit and local loyalty are important to survival.

Community leaders say they've got to find ways to keep more young people in the town, but everybody also sees the area's sizable retired population as an asset. "Social Security checks are a regular, stable source of income," one leader said matter-of-factly.

While it has to compete with its bigger neighbor on the freeway to the north, being even that close to a major transportation route is considered an asset in Nebraska, and some economists have predicted that proximity to the Interstate highway will mean the difference between life and death for many Nebraska communities. Geneva is also a wealthy community -- Fillmore County ranked 10th in per capita income among the state's 93 counties in a recent study.

Given its proximity to the highway and its relative economic strength, Geneva is a town that might rest on those assets. But it doesn't.

Leadership is important here, and many people recognize it. "We're blessed with a few creative people and a good support network," one resident said.

As in many thriving communities, this town is also blessed with a generation of younger leaders and active participation of women in the leadership core. "Many people are very good at community organization," observed one community leader. "And lots of people are wearing lots of different hats."

Not that everything gets done without a struggle. One leader conceded that the community really has no master plan, and as a result there's a lot of tug and pull as projects get moved along. The bond issues for new school and hospital wings failed many times, were modified as a result of informal, "coffee-shop" negotiation, and finally passed. A downtown improvement project had to overcome considerable opposition and the county-wide senior handi-van program had to leap hurdles too. Now those things are a matter of pride, even for many who once fought them.

A key player in such initiatives is the Economic Development Corporation, now thinking county-wide. It is a catalyst for new ideas and projects, pushing people toward a consensus, raising money, getting commitments.

"There is a sense of hope of outlasting bad times," said a community leader.

"This corner of the earth smiles for me."

A quotation from Homer, seen in a store in downtown Wausa.

The main street of Wausa is, at first glance, typical of many small Nebraska towns. There is an impression of attention paid to detail, of everyday life that is orderly and predictable and, above all, an impression of solid, continuing history. The awareness of staying power is evident in the not-so-new but serviceable store fronts and the work clothes of their customers. This is a community that was founded in a determined fashion by Swedish immigrants about 100 years ago. It has survived because the attitudes of the founders have continued to the present. As one resident observed, "When our great-grandparents arrived here, they knew we'd be coming along someday. This town was built for their families and their descendents."

Today, 650 people live in Wausa. Although a high percentage of the community is in the +60 age group, the elementary school classrooms are full and the population seems to be holding steady. One church member noted, "During the month of August, the community saw four deaths and five births."

People here believe that their town is an excellent example of a well-kept, friendly mid-western community. "I guess there's nothing really special about our town unless you think it's unusual these days for people to care about keeping things in good order," said a community leader.

Appearance is definitely seen as a strong point by community members and, although a few empty residences are in evidence, substandard or vacant housing does not seem to be a problem. The residential streets, mostly paved, are all well maintained. Homes show evidence of the owners' care and pride.

The people of Wausa are proud of the Community Hall (which can hold gatherings of 1200), the school facilities, the nursing home : physical evidence of the solidity and perserverance of the community. While community members might not discuss the appearance of their business district or the medical/dental clinic as symbols of the strength of the community, there can be no doubt that people do recognize the importance of these community assets to the future of their town. "We've always worked hard to keep health services in the town," said a community leader. "It makes all the difference in the number of people from other towns who come here for services and then stay to shop. We're very lucky that our professionals are committed to the community, too."

"Leadership here is seen as getting the right person to get the job done. There really isn't any one group that controls things," observed a lifetime resident. This pragmatic approach seems to be typical of Wausa.

The formal leadership of the community is focused on the Village Board and several organizations such as the Community Club (recently renamed from the Commercial Club in an effort to broaden membership beyond business interests) and a Women's Club. In Wausa, perhaps because of its small size,leadership roles seem to be quite fluid and change easily. The regulars at the local cafe, elected officals, officers of clubs and those in charge of community projects are often all the same people. Leadership is diffused but recognizable.

Conscious efforts are made by these leaders to include newcomers and younger community members in projects and tasks that serve as training ground for continued community service. While this type of mentoring behavior is described as "giving the young kids a turn at handling the jobs", it provides a smooth transition to new leadership for the community.

Existence of a younger leadership group, with an average age of less than 40, also indicates a positive trend among the downtown businesses in Wausa. Family-owned business which have two active generations at work represent many of main street businesses in the community. But there are also several business owners who have adopted Wausa as their own and plan to stay.

This group of young managers also forms the organized group working on economic development efforts. The group, referred to as an Economic Development Coporation, persisted in the effort, ultimately successful, to get a Community Development Block Grant to help a main street business expand. Currently, the group is using an innovative strategy to bring jobs to the town: they are searching for a small business to buy with local investors' money and relocate in Wausa.

Located in the northeastern part of Nebraska, Wausa is 45 miles from Norfolk and 40 miles from Yankton, South Dakota. The trade area for Wausa business exceeds what might be predicted for the town. Local businesses, which offer sales and services in an area described as "from river to river", explain their sizable sales territory by affirming that they sell service, not products. "There are some towns nearby where I've sold nearly every family a product..," explained the owner of one family business.

The impact of changes in the agricultural economy is apparent in Wausa. Those dealing with the human service and counseling needs of the community will mention family stress and an increased expression of neighborliness as results of economic change. Library use has increased as magazine subscriptions are discontinued and fewer books purchased by families, which are

spending more carefully these days. A greater number of high school seniors have gone on to college in the last two years, a recognition that there may not be a future in family farming.

Despite a recognition of the difficulties of the farm economy and personal knowledge of friends and family adversely affected by the economic turmoil, community leaders in Wausa also recognize that their community is not as severely affected as other towns. Many leaders say that few local farmers had been tempted to expand beyond their capabilities; some mentioned that the soil in the area was too heavy to be improved by irrigation, so little or no debt was incurred to buy extensive irrigation systems; others said the frugal traditions of their Swedish heritage that has kept Wausa from overspending their good sense.

"Our people are really cautious about spending money they don't have, but at the same time they are willing to invest in their businesses when they have a chance to make the town better," said one member of the Economic Development Corporation. Noted another, "We've had to be really persistent in getting help from state agencies and outside programs, but it's been worth all the hassle and paperwork." Even a small program can make a difference in a town this size.

It may be a combination of such a heritage that results in a vision of a future Wausa that preserves the present sense of small town security, cooperation, and common sense. While few if any Wausans want their community to be much changed in the future, there are groups within the community who do discuss the hopes and fears, threats and opportunities represented by the future.

"I'd like to see a few more small businesses, maybe more jobs that aren't dependent on agriculture but, you know, I wouldn't trade the small town atmosphere for a shopping center," said one leader. "I think one of the things we do right in this town is to understand that to keep what we enjoy here -- we have to keep up with modern changes and try to control what happens to our community."

20 CLUES TO RURAL COMMUNITY SURVIVAL
An Annotated List

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1. **Evidence of Community Pride.** Successful communities are often showplaces of community care and attention, with neatly trimmed yards, public gardens, well-kept parks. But pride also shows up in other ways, especially in community festivals and events that give residents an excuse to celebrate their community, its history and heritage.

2. **Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life.** People in successful communities believe that something worth doing is worth doing right. Facilities are built to last, and so are homes and other improvements. Newer brick additions to schools are common, for example, and businesses are built or expanded with attention to design and construction detail.

3. **Willingness to Invest in the Future.** Some of the brick-and-mortar investments are most apparent, but these communities also invest in their future in other ways. Residents invest time and energy in community betterment, for example, and they concern themselves with how what they are doing today will impact on their lives and those of their children and grandchildren in the future.

4. **Participatory Approach to Community Decision-Making.** Authoritarian models don't seem to exist in these communities, and power is in fact deliberately shared. People still know who you need on your side to get something done, but even the most powerful of opinion leaders seem to work through the systems -- formal as well as informal -- to build consensus for what they want to do.

5. **Cooperative Community Spirit.** Successful rural communities devote more attention to cooperative activities than to fighting over what should be done and by whom. The stress is on working together toward a common goal and the focus is on positive results. They may spend a long time making a decision, and there may be disagreements along the way, but eventually, as one resident put it, "stuff does get done."

6. **Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities.** Many of the communities have already learned an important strategic lesson, namely building on your strengths and minimizing your weaknesses. Few small communities believe that they are likely to land a giant industry. Many of them say they wouldn't want one if it came along, fearing that too much reliance on one industry would be unhealthy in any event.

7. **Awareness of Competitive Positioning.** The thriving communities know who their competitors are, and so do the businesses in them. Everyone tries to emphasize local loyalty as

a way to assist local businesses, but many business also keep tabs on their competitors in other towns -- they don't want any of the hometown folks to have an excuse to go elsewhere. Business and community leaders worry about what they don't have locally and wonder how many people are driving to other towns to get it.

8. **Knowledge of the Physical Environment.** Importance of location is underscored continually in local decision-making, as business and civic leaders picture their community in relation to others. Beyond location, however, communities are also familiar with what they have locally. The kind of agriculture, which is dependent on available natural resources, is an important factor in the local economy.

9. **Active Economic Development Program.** An organized and active approach to economic development is common in the successful communities and it involves both public and private sector initiatives, often working hand in hand. Private economic development corporations are common, either as an arm or an outgrowth of a chamber of commerce or commercial club.

10. **Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation of Leaders.** Young leadership is the rule more than the exception in thriving rural communities, where people under 40 often hold key positions in both civic and business affairs. In many cases these young people grew up in the town and decided to stay or returned after college. In many other cases, they are people who have decided to make a life in the community even though they grew up elsewhere.

11. **Acceptance of Women in Leadership Roles.** Women hold positions of leadership in these rural communities, and those roles extend beyond the traditional strongholds of female leadership. Women are elected as mayors, are hired to manage health care facilities, develop entrepreneurial ventures, are elected as presidents of chambers of commerce.

12. **Strong Belief in and Support for Education.** Good schools are a point of pride, as well as a stable employment force, and rural community leaders are very much aware of their importance. Residents want their children to get the best education they can afford. Beyond that, the school is often a center of social activity, and sporting and other school events are well-attended.

13. **Problem-solving Approach to Providing Health Care.** Local health care is a common concern in rural communities, but strategies for health care delivery vary, depending on community needs. One community decides that keeping a doctor in the town is important; another focuses on emergency medical services; another invests heavily in comprehensive hospital-based services. A health care program, of some kind, is often viewed as essential to the community's health, as well.

14. **Strong Multi-Generational Family Orientation.** These are family-oriented communities, with activities often built around family needs and ties. But the definition of family is broad, and it includes younger as well as older generations and people new to the community. In one community, a resident said everyone is considered a cousin shortly after their arrival.

15. **Strong Presence of Traditional Institutions that are Integral to Community Life.** Churches represent perhaps the strongest force in this regard, and community activities often include or are centered on the church. Schools play a similar role. Service clubs retain a strong influence, and that influence is felt in community development as well as in social activities.

16. **Sound and Well-maintained Infrastructure.** Rural communities understand the importance of traditional infrastructures -- such as streets and sidewalks, water systems, sewage treatment facilities -- and they work hard to maintain and improve them. But many of them are also worried that in this area especially they'll need outside funding help to keep up, and they wonder whether it will be available to them in the future.

17. **Careful Use of Fiscal Resources.** Frugality is a way of life in the successful small communities, and expenditures are made carefully. People aren't afraid to spend money, when they believe they should, and then, typically, things are built to last. But neither are they spendthrifts. Expenditures are, again, often seen as investments in the future of the community.

18. **Sophisticated Use of Information Resources.** Rural community leaders are knowledgeable about their communities beyond the knowledge base available in the community. In one town, for example, retail sales histories from the University of Nebraska were studied for trend information. In another, census data was used to study population change. In another, modern computer equipment kept people up to date on financial matters.

19. **Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside.** There's little reluctance in successful rural communities to seek outside help, and many of them demonstrate their success at competing for government grants and contracts for economic development, sewer and water systems, recreation, street and sidewalk improvement, and senior citizen programs.

20. **Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself.** Although outside help is sought when appropriate, it is nevertheless true that thriving small communities believe their destiny is in their own hands. They are not waiting for someone else to save them, nor do they believe that "things will turn out" if they sit back and wait. Making their communities good places to live for a long time to come is a pro-active assignment, and they willingly accept it.